

**Interview with Michael Cocchiola**  
**February 2, 2005**  
**Pittsburgh, PA**  
**Interviewer: Nicholas Ciotola**  
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[Begin Tape 1, Side A]

NC: Cocchiola is an Italian name. Could you tell me a little bit about your Italian ancestry, for instance who was it that first came over from Italy in your family?

MC: Yes. Well, my grandfather and my father and his brothers came over from the Naples area of Italy. My mother also came over from the La Campania area east of Naples in Italy. They didn't know one another but they met here in the United States and they were married later.

NC: What was your father's name and your mother's name?

MC: My father's name was Carmine Cocchiola. My mother's name was Angelina Giaquinto. Her name was actually Angela Marie but it evolved into Angelina somehow. That's what she used, Angelina.

NC: Where did the family settle when they came to the United States?

MC: They settled in New Jersey, in Nutley, New Jersey.

NC: Where is that?

MC: That is a few miles east of New York in northern New Jersey and I was born in Nutley, New Jersey. My mother had settled in Raritan, New Jersey which is over by Somerville and Plainfield and Bound Brook, New Jersey. How my mother and father met I don't know, probably through mutual friends.

NC: Raritan, is that close to Nutley? Are they close together?

MC: No, they're about 70 miles apart, I think something like that. Raritan, New Jersey does have a large Italian community.

NC: John Basilone was from Raritan or lived in Raritan.

- MC: I knew him, I knew John Basilone. I didn't know him that well. Manila John is what they called him. He won the Medal of Honor at Guadalcanal.
- NC: Tell me a little bit about Nutley, New Jersey. Was there a big Italian community in Nutley?
- MC: Well I don't know how big it was but it's been very forceful. My cousins have held political office there. Right now the mayor of Nutley, New Jersey is Joanne Cocchiola. She was elected last year. Her father was a member of the council, he's retired now but he was on the council for a few years. My cousin Carmen Urrechio is on the council, he was mayor three times there. He was also a state senator in New Jersey for about 20 years, then he retired. His brother Frank Urrechio was active and his brother Carl Urrechio was a New Jersey assembly man. Of course they are all gone now except Carmen Urrechio. I saw Carmen Urrechio last year when I visited New Jersey for a funeral.
- NC: When you were growing up in New Jersey, was the home you grew up in a distinctly Italian home? What kind of examples of the Italian culture took place in your home? Was the language present when you were growing up?
- MC: Well yes, except my father always used to say to my mother that "You're an American now, speak English." But my mother always used to start off a little bit in English but then she switched to Italian but then she switched back to English again. When I would call her on the telephone she would switch back and forth. We always had a little bit of Italian in us. My mother used to like the backyard we had, she grew figs there and tomatoes things like that.
- NC: Did you have any brothers or sisters?
- MC: I had an older brother, an older sister, and a younger brother and they're all gone. I'm the only one left now.
- NC: Tell me about your early memories. Does anything stand out from growing up in Nutley?
- MC: Not of Nutley because we moved from Nutley to north New Jersey when I was about four years old, something like that. We lived on Garside Street in north New Jersey for a while. My dad worked at Pittsburgh Plate Glass, so he decided to build a three story house on Grafton Avenue in north Newark, New Jersey; then he could walk to work. It was three stories and he rented out the two and it

was Elliot Street School right across the street so it was very convenient. When I was about five years old or so that's where I was and I stayed there in that house until World War II came along.

NC: Did you attend that school that was across the street?

MC: Yes, I graduated from Elliot Street School in 1931.

NC: That was an elementary school and then did you go on to another school?

MC: I went to Barringer High School. I graduated from Barringer High School in 1935.

NC: When you were growing up and attending the school, obviously you probably went to school with people whose relatives came from many different parts of the world. Was there any incidence where you were looked down upon because of your Italian heritage or were you accepted as a member of the community and a member of the school?

MC: We were accepted in that area. There weren't any problems because about ten blocks or so to the east there was Verona Avenue and that was where you had a lot of Italians and you had a lot of Italian food stores and all this kind of stuff. Then the Immaculate Conception Roman Catholic Church, they said their mass in Italian. We had an Italian born priest there. So there was plenty of Italian around.

NC: Did you want to when you were in school, did you want to be Italian or did you want to be American? Did you think at all about your heritage at that point in your life?

MC: No, no it wasn't that way. Elliot Street School had everything. They had different nationalities, different races and there was never any problem.

NC: Tell me if you remember anything about your parents view towards Mussolini, Mussolini's coming to power in the late '20s the 1930s. Was there any talk about Mussolini when you were younger, when you were growing up, or were your parents kind of focusing on their life here in the United States and not really Italy?

MC: My dad primarily was focused on his life here in the United States. Like he said to my mother, "You're an American now, speak English." Fact of the matter is, my mother went back to Italy on two trips but she went alone. My dad didn't

want to go back particularly but she wanted to go back to see her mother there and that was the only reason. When my grandmother passed away she never went back anymore.

NC: Tell me if you remember, and if so what happened, when you found out that Pearl Harbor had been attacked. Do you remember where you were and what you were doing when that announcement came through?

MC: I was in the Army at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

NC: Oh, you were already in the Army at that point.

MC: Yes, I was inducted November 6, 1941 at Fort Dix, New Jersey.

NC: A month before Pearl Harbor.

MC: Yeah, it was.

NC: How did it come about that you entered the military?

MC: I was drafted. I had no choice, although I could have gotten a three month deferment from Pittsburgh Plate Glass. The treasury said to me, "Mike I can get you a 90 day deferment." I said to him I might as well go and get it over with. Why wait around for 90 days? All I would be doing is having going away parties. So I went November 6 to Fort Dix, New Jersey.

NC: What was your feeling when you found you had been drafted? Were you scared, were you proud, were you nervous?

MC: No, I was more or less indifferent to it, you see. September 1940, my older brother Frank volunteered for the one-year service. He and three buddies, they got a lot of publicity in the paper. They signed up for one-year, so he served one year with the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division from September 1940 to September 1941 and then they discharged them, but that didn't do them any good because in 1942 he had to go back in again. The one-year service didn't get him anything. That one-year voluntary service was supposed to take care of your draft obligation but it didn't work out that way.

NC: When you were drafted and reported to Fort Dix, New Jersey did you at that point have any idea about the scale of the conflict and America's involvement in the

conflict? Did you know that this world war was going to happen and that you were going to be in the middle?

MC: Oh yes, I felt that sooner or later. I had been following Franklin Roosevelt's Lend-Lease Program and so forth and I knew that it was just a matter of time. Funny thing about that, I might relate this, on November 6, I went in Fort Dix, on November 7 after they gave me my uniform and so forth, I was being interviewed the next day. I'm sitting there in the interview room, I remember it was a Friday; I was inducted on a Thursday. Friday November 7 I am sitting there waiting my turn to be interviewed and that was supposed to be to classify you in a particular branch of service or whatever. This was the Army but whether it was going to be artillery, infantry, finance, or what. So I am sitting there and this fellow comes walking by, I look up, I said "Pete!" It was Pete Cummings who lived a block away from me, I used to go to his house. My brother used to go over there and play poker. Pete Cummings was a beefy guy, big beefy guy. He was a corporal. He says, "Sergeant I'll take this man next." So I figured, oh boy now I'm going to get myself a choice assignment, right. So he takes me in, I'm facing him like you and I are facing. I said, "Pete what's it look like here, what are my choices?" He puts down his pencil and he says, "Mike, you're probably gonna go down to Fort Bragg, North Carolina to Field Artillery Replacement Training Center on Monday." I said, "Pete you haven't asked me a question, nothing." He said, "We gotta fill a quota Mike." Monday I went down to Fort Bragg, North Carolina to Field Artillery Replacement Center. That was that.

NC: Some friend he was, right?

MC: He couldn't do anything about it; they had to fill a quota. Fort Bragg had started up Field Artillery Training Center about, I would say, May of 1941 and they were starting to increase their schedules and they needed men in there. The whole group that I went in on that day, November 6 from that area, we all went to Fort Bragg for field artillery.

NC: Did you know anything about the artillery at that point in your life? Did you have any experience with it?

MC: No, nothing.

NC: Tell me about any perceptions that you noticed about Italian Americans once Italy went to war against the United States. Did anything happen here at that time, that

people looked down upon Italians because their ancestors in Italy were fighting against the United States? Did you experience that or did your parents experience that?

MC: No, no actually not. I don't think Mussolini was a factor at all. They knew that Hitler was the brains behind the whole thing and that Mussolini just went along with it. Italians were not in favor of Mussolini going to war, so we never experienced any problems. This group that I was inducted with there were quite a few Italians because they come from north New Jersey and they came from Jersey City, New Jersey and they came from New York City. That whole group, there was a fairly good number of Italians in there.

NC: Did they tend to in the military from your observations, stick together or did they kind of intermingle with all the other people of non-Italians?

MC: Well, when they put us in the barracks you did it alphabetically. So I was in the first barracks, my surname began with a C. One fellow Marty Burn, he and I became good friends. He was from Newark, New Jersey. He was downstairs and I was upstairs, just got to know one another. He was Irish, I was Italian but we got along great for 50 years or so. It was just who you were with; nobody even thought about that, what your nationality was.

NC: Do you remember your first day at Fort Bragg? Do you remember what was going through your mind and what happened when you first arrived at this training facility?

MC: No, it was just routine. You're getting all your bedding and so forth, getting your spot in the barracks.

NC: How did the officers treat you?

MC: Well, you see in the barracks you had on each floor you had a corporal and a sergeant. They had their own room at the end of the floor. I remember the sergeant's name was Moody, his last name, and the corporal's name was Offit and we used to call him the Offit Corporal. So that's how you were told what to do. They'd been around. They were most of them in the regular Army and they told us what to do and we did it.

NC: Give me an example of some of your training after you were recruited and went to Fort Bragg. What type of things did you do?

MC: We were on the 155 mm “Long Tom” cannon that was an old WWI French type artillery weapon. We were cannoniers. You work on the gun and clean it up, load it up, whatever you had to do. It was an obsolete weapon, this was only for training. That particular weapon was not used in WWII, that was an old one. WWII you used the 155 mm “Long Tom” and eventually it was on half-tracks and also the 155 mm howitzer which was a shorter gun and then the 105 mm howitzer, those were the up to date artillery shells that were being utilized.

NC: At Bragg were you training on those howitzers or only on those obsolete WWI?

MC: No, only on the obsolete. This was only 13 weeks of training and they weren't concerned about proficiency on modern weapons because that was going to come later when you go to your regular outfit. A couple of things that happened at Bragg were kind of silly, I guess in a way. You asked about the first day, well the next week we were in right after reveille they said anybody who has a driver's license take one step forward. So I took one step forward, I figured hey maybe I'm gonna get a jeep or something. So they marched us down to the battalion motor pool and help change the oil on the trucks that's what we did. I said to myself I gotta be careful what I volunteer for around here. But it worked out though, I remember one time I had a jeep assignment that day from message center, you know delivery stuff and what have you, and it was a drizzling day. It was late November I guess. I come back at lunch time; I went and got my mess kit. I started to walk up to the mess hall. I get up close to the mess hall and I see these guys all standing outside. I said “What's going on?” You know I just finished my work in the morning and I was coming back from my lunch. They said “We're not going to eat today.” I said, “Why not?” “We're on strike.” I said, “You're on strike?” I figured, what are they on strike for? I want my lunch. They had a session with the mess sergeant, he was a regular Army guy from Tennessee, he was a staff sergeant. Somebody said something in the starter and he said “Everybody outside, nobody lining up in the mess hall.” So they retaliated and they said “We're not going to eat your food.” There was no lunch for anybody that day. So that afternoon around 3:30 or so we were all told to go to the auditorium. So we all went to the auditorium and there was this full colonel up there, southern colonel and he said to us, “I could have all you men court-marshaled for disobeying orders and so forth.” I'm sitting there and I've had no lunch, nothing and he's gonna threaten us with court-marshal. We are making \$21 a month and you take out \$.25 for the battery fund and you take out \$6 for laundry. What do we wind up with, less than \$15, how worse can you get? He didn't court-marshal anybody, but that proves the answer to your question. These

guys are street smart from New York City, Jersey City, Newark, New Jersey and that area. They don't take anything from anybody and they know how to retaliate and that's what they did that day. They wouldn't take any guff from anybody. That's why they told that mess sergeant where to get off at. I understand that later on he was transferred.

NC: Did you have any difficulty converting yourself to military life, the daily regimens, the workouts, and the training?

MC: No, I was single and that helps. You don't have to dwell on what's happening at home and all that kind of stuff. It worked out pretty well.

NC: You were at Fort Bragg when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

MC: Yes, that was the Sunday I guess it was with the time difference there. I know Moody and Offit were running around. They ran to supply and got rifles and so forth. They were ready for anything I guess. Of course we weren't allowed to have anything but everybody was on alert that day.

NC: Did you notice a mood change amongst the men from before Pearl Harbor and after Pearl Harbor? Did they become more serious in the training that you were doing? Was there more of a concern?

MC: No, there wasn't that much of a change. Actually, I think that most of these guys were single, most of them at that time. It didn't mean that much to them, everybody wanted to finish their training and go someplace else, that was the attitude. They were wondering where they're gonna go because some of them probably wouldn't stay in the artillery. I know one guy; he was a bookish sort of individual. He wound up in Indiana in finance division, he was a stock broker.

NC: What about your training specifically? You spent those 13 weeks at Fort Bragg, what happened after that?

MC: Well, about a couple of weeks were finished there we got word that we were going up to Sackets Harbor on Lake Ontario and join a National Guard outfit as replacements, but there was about 20 or 25 of us and I was one of them and they said "No you're not going. You're going down to Camp Claiborne, Louisiana and join the 44<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division as replacements down there." And that was the New Jersey National Guard outfit. That kind of disappointed me because here I'd been with these guys 13 weeks and now they're gonna put me as a replacement

with people I don't even know; but luckily two weeks later after these other guys pulled out and went up to Sackets Harbor they changed their mind and we went up to Sackets Harbor, luckily. I was back with my group again, so that was fine, I didn't have to make new friends. That's where we stayed for a while and that was up near Watertown, New York. It was the 258<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Regiment. We did pretty good. We had marches and every time, of course we were younger and stronger, that we beat the old National Guard. Those guys were older but they had all the ratings. I was put in the headquarters as a fire direction control guy. The guy who had that job he was a staff sergeant, he didn't do that job. I was a private and I was doing the job because they maintained their ratings. That was the only bad feature of it.

NC: Tell me what the fire direction control person would actually do. What was their role?

MC: It would be in the Fire Direction Control Center in the command post and he would give out the commands. Left so much and right so much and give the direction of the fire for the equipment, whatever it might be whatever the cannons would be. That's what a fire direction control guy would do. He would measure on a map exactly where the target and what you need to get the weapon to put a projectile onto the target.

NC: How did you come to be the one selected for that? It sounds like that is a more technical job; it takes a little more intelligence perhaps. It takes a little more experience. Did you have some pre-war experience in that area?

MC: No, see I was an accountant and I'd gone to college for a couple of years during the evening while I was working at PPG. So I was good at figures and so forth and that's what you have to do. So I was in the 258<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Regiment and then they broke it up and then made up the other battalion and the 258<sup>th</sup> became the 991<sup>st</sup> Field Artillery Battalion and they started to bring the younger guys into it. Eventually I went to Officer's Candidate School after they shifted me to the 186<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery; they broke up the 258<sup>th</sup> as a regiment and made battalions out of it. I went to 186<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Battalion and fire direction control. I got along real well there, in a matter of several months they told 'em that I was okay for Officer Candidate School at Fort Sill, Oklahoma and that's where I went.

NC: So after New York you went out to Fort Sill?

MC: Fort Sill, Oklahoma for officer training and I became a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant January 21<sup>st</sup>, 1943. It was a kind of odd coincidence on that I was good at fire direction and the fellow I had met as a master sergeant in the 258<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery in headquarters, he was out there as a 2<sup>nd</sup> lieutenant on teaching tactics and of course I was in his class. It was a big class. So one evening there was a knock on the door in our hut. There was six of us in the hut, that's how they operated out in Fort Sill. It was John Rice, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. John Rice. Everybody snapped to attention. We acted like privates, some had better ratings. He asked me to come outside and he asked me if I'd like to stay there in Fort Sill, Oklahoma as a gunnery instructor. I says "Oh no John, thanks but no thanks." He meant well but that wasn't for me.

NC: Did you, during all of your training at both Basic and OCS, did you receive training in small arms weapons? What kind of weapons were you trained with?

MC: Oh yeah. We had the carbine. I was an expert on the carbine and a sharpshooter on .45 caliber handgun.

NC: Did you have any pre-war experience with guns?

MC: No.

NC: Tell me about after you graduated from Officer's Candidate School. What happened next?

MC: We had a choice. They gave you a choice of three places you could go to. One was tank destroyer outfit in Camp Howze, Texas. There was Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

NC: Was that a tank destroyer outfit too?

MC: No. I'm trying to think of the third one, but I can't seem to think what the choice was. It escapes me, but anyways, I chose Fort Bragg because that was in the eastern part of the United States and I figured I could get home a little easier from there. So I went to Fort Bragg. Then we made another choice, there I went to the 11<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division. Glider field artillery, that was a brand new outfit, brand new division. The only thing wrong with it was I surprised at all the men that came in didn't have any training. We had to give them basic training and I wasn't happy with that. Usually, you get your basic training somewhere and then you go to a division, but here they didn't do that. So I had to give them basic training, of course, it put me in good shape. I was really running around and all that kind of

stuff. Now this was the glider field artillery and of course you had the paratroopers for the infantry right along side of us. Eventually, I had to get out of that outfit because the atmosphere wasn't good with my group, my battery commander. He was from Baltimore and he got into a discussion with one of my friends there, he was reconnaissance officer Bob Barry. Poor Bob he lost his eye in an accident, they were working on some bombs in a rehearsal bid-whack area. Any rate I sided with Bob one night when we were out drinking with the general's daughter there. They had a dance and I'm dancing. I shifted over to the 795<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Battalion at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. I was glad to get out of there. I always tried to get something that I like to do, wanted to do. Over at the 795<sup>th</sup> I was there a while and I met my buddy Andy Cortize, Angelo Cortize from New Jersey. I'd met him out at Fort Sill at OCS and he was the executive officer of the battery and we threw a reunion more or less. We used to go home on weekends. I had my brother's car and we'd go home. We'd get some choice bottles of liquor from Andy's father at the tavern and bring them back. We'd give them out to those we liked and those who we didn't care much, we gave the lesser brands.

NC: Were you back in New Jersey at the time you were with the 795<sup>th</sup>?

MC: Still Fort Bragg. So one day at lunch time I was sitting there and this lieutenant opposite me was saying goodbye to some of the others. I didn't know him at all, I had seen him around. I said "Where are you going?" He said "I'm going to the Air Force." "You are? How are you doing that?" He said "They want officers as well as enlisted men for aircrew training." "How do you get that?" Now you have to understand that this happened within, I mean if I hadn't been there that day at that time and watched them saying goodbye to this guy I would have never known about this. So he says, "All you have to do, Mike, is get an application and get a physical over at Pope AFB, (which was right at Fort Bragg) and send it directly to Captain Brown in Washington, DC." "Oh is that it?" He said "Yeah." So Andy Cortize and I decided to do that. So I went first and I got my physical and Andy didn't pass, I guess he had been out drinking too much beer. He had to go the next day for another physical. In the mean time I took my application and my physical was okay and I went into to see the colonel who nobody ever did like. I can't remember his name. He was from Fort Sill. He was an instructor out there. He'd never had any combat, but he knew his paperwork, that's about all I can say for him. So I went into see the colonel and I told him what I wanted to do. He said, "Lieutenant, do you realize that the Army has spent over \$5,000 to train you as a field artillery officer?" I said, "Yes, I understand that colonel, but all you have to do if you don't approve of this is say, not approved." There was a

spot on the paper that said approve or disapprove. So he disapproved it and I said “You can send that directly to Washington DC to Capt. Brown.” He said “No, I’m not going to do that, I am going to send it up the chain-of-command up to Brigade and then it will take care of itself.” So I had to salute and leave. The first thing I did was go out and see the master sergeant. I told him my problem. I said “There’s a paper coming out going up the brigade. My name’s on it and that really should go to Washington, DC.” Now I was taking a chance here. I come out later that day; the master sergeant didn’t do it. The paper went up. I went up the brigade and I saw this 2<sup>nd</sup> lieutenant there and I told him my problem about this paperwork should be going to Washington DC. He reached down and the bottom drawer of his desk and he pulls out my paperwork, the blue paper. Oh I said to myself, this is going to 3<sup>rd</sup> Army in Tennessee that’s the headquarters and it’ll never get there. So I said to the lieutenant, “There’s been an error here; that really should be going to Washington DC.” He said, “Oh, I don’t really know about it.” He marks it CO-commanding officer 795<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Battalion and he sends it back. That’s when I went over and I saw the corporal at the message center. I said “There’s a piece of paper with my name CO 795<sup>th</sup> it’s name on it, get it and put it in my pigeon hole, okay?” He said “Okay, if I see it I’ll do it.” So that afternoon around 5 o’clock I go over and there it is in my pigeon hole. I put it in the envelope and I mail it to Washington. In the meantime, Andy Cortize he’s having conniptions because he’s saying, “Oh, you’re going to get court-marshaled!” He goes in to see the colonel and he said “I’m not signing any transfers, period,” because Andy was the executive officer of the battery. He wouldn’t even disapprove it, he wouldn’t sign it. He stayed there. About three weeks later the colonel calls me into his office. He said, “Lieutenant, I can’t understand this.” “What’s that Colonel?” “I’ve got orders for you to report to San Antonio, Texas for aircrew training.” “Is that so Colonel?” “Yes, you got 10 delay en route.” Everybody was astonished. I probably would have been court-marshaled if I had been caught, but it worked out. I got ten days, I went home to Newark, New Jersey and for that weekend my mother comes into my bedroom and said “There’s somebody outside to see you.” There was three guys from Fort Bragg; they drove up to see me off.

- NC: What was it about joining an aircrew that interested you so much that you would go through all of this trouble? Did you have a desire just to get out of the artillery or was there something about planes and the air corps that was interesting?
- MC: I thought about pilot training for a while there, but then it was just that I didn’t feel right in that outfit particularly. I thought I’d get some training and see where I could go, maybe a navigator. A navigator seemed to be a good choice too.

NC: Had you been in a plane before?

MC: Yeah, I had been flying commercially before that in my job and so forth. The only problem here was that my orders, it said I'd go to San Antonio, Texas for aircrew training, in the event that I did not pass the physical, I report back to my old outfit. There was no way. I was going to take anything, whether it was pilot, bombardier, navigator, anything that they accept me for so that I wouldn't have to go back and face the colonel again, you know. Because you know what that would be. So it worked out that I took bombardier/navigator.

NC: You thought you had the option of choosing whichever one you wanted?

MC: Yes, whatever you could pass the physical for. On depth perception, I was a little bit shaky on that and that's imperative for a pilot.

NC: I assume some of the experience you got reading map coordinates for the artillery helps you out being a bombardier/navigator.

MC: Oh sure. Yeah, yeah. That's helpful knowledge of maps and things like that. Then I went through the aircrew training. The other reason I didn't go for pilot was because pilot takes too long. It would have taken an awful long time and I was anxious to get overseas a little bit, you know. I knew I could go through bombardier training, no problem with that.

NC: Tell me a little bit about the training for the...

[End Tape 1, Side A]

[Begin Tape 2, Side B]

MC: I went to, well it was in Texas, Ellington Field for several weeks and Childress AFB up near Amarillo and that was sort of the balance of that training. Dropping bombs, practice bombs and things like that and you'd get dead reckoning navigation training as well. You'd get both of them and I passed that. Then they assign you to a crew at Omaha, Nebraska where you crewed up with people we didn't know, just navigators, pilots, gunners, whatever.

NC: Do you remember the guys on your first crew? They were guys from all over the country? Tell me about the officers on board your plane, would have been the

pilot, the co-pilot, the bombardier/navigator, were there have been a fourth officer?

MC: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. Six. Radio operator and five gunners, tail gunner, two waist gunners, nose gunner.

NC: Tell me a little bit about the planes that you flew. What was the name of the plane that you flew? Type of plane that you flew?

MC: Eventually you mean, not the training. The training were the smaller ones just strictly for bombing. B-24 Liberator, they made more B-24 Liberators than any other bomber in WWII. They used them both in the South Pacific and out of England, out of Italy, out of Northern Africa, but the B-17 Flying Fortress got a lot of publicity. We always used to say the B-17 had a public relations guy on each plane.

NC: Yeah, a lot of people remember the *Memphis Belle*. So the guys that you met and were crewed up with at Omaha, those were the guys that you would fly with when you went overseas or some of them were?

MC: Yes, the only problem with that was after a while I was over there I flew about four or five missions with them; they took me off the crew and put me on what I call "The Flying Misfits." These were guys who for one reason or another they were sick, maybe they needed a couple of missions to finish their 35 or 30 if you were lead crew. John Corby was a co-pilot; he became ill so he didn't finish up with his crew so he was pilot. I was the navigator, bombardier/navigator. Others who needed a few missions to finish out their 35 were put on there. I had no choice really. They promoted me to First Lieutenant after I had a few missions; then one day, this is kind of ironic, I see this guy all the time, now I am going to see him again when we go down to Savannah, Andy Andreessen from California. He said he slept a couple of beds away from me. He came in with his crew. He said, "Mike, you are flying with the colonel tomorrow." I says, "What?" This is Lt. Col. Heber Thompson; he was our squadron commander, 713<sup>th</sup> Squadron. He said, "Yeah, he's coming back. He finished up his 30 missions as lead crew and he went home for leave. Now he's come back and he wants to fly an element lead, just for practice to get the hands on. Captain will be the co-pilot." Captain was down at the other end of my hut and he was a guy who didn't get along with his crew, of course I didn't know this until later. They moved him into our hut. He was the co-pilot, I was the bombardier/navigator, Heber Thompson one of the best pilots ever he was squadron commander, he was only 27, he was the pilot,

and of course we got all these guys. Some I knew, some I didn't know, I wouldn't know who was gonna show up to be the gunner or whatever, the nose gunner I wouldn't know. We went that day. We went to Hamburg to bomb. I'll never forget that. We were on the bomb run; we hit the IP, the initial point, and all of the sudden fog. Nothing. I looked out the blister and I couldn't see anybody. We were in element lead; we were in front anyway on the high right. I look out, nobody, there was just fog. I had the bomb bay doors open and I'm waiting. There's nothing to do. Finally, the pilot, the colonel says "Close the bomb bay doors." I guess he told the others, because I couldn't hear; I'm down in the nose, to put the pins back in the bombs. I didn't know what he did because I thought maybe he might want to drop them anywhere, somewhere. We were over Hamburg and you go up to the North Sea, it wasn't very far and then you get into the English Channel. He says, "Give me a heading home." So I give him a heading that was 3-10, I think it was. Okay, we started out and still we couldn't see anything. I don't like fog, I didn't see one other plane and we're up at 30,000 feet or whatever it was. We go out and we're going up and luckily, just going over the German coast there, a squadron or maybe it was a group of B-24s came by. You could tell by the tail markings that it was part of our combat wing. We had about five groups in the wing. I hear him say, "Pilot, navigator, I am going to tag onto this group." I said, "Okay," I said, "Roger." I was so happy because we could see. So he tags on and I thought what about the bombs? Isn't he gonna drop them? You know, he's a lieutenant colonel, maybe he doesn't want to drop bombs anywhere. I said we're gonna take these back with us? I wasn't happy about that. So he tags on and he goes on a while, we're over the English Channel you can drop bombs there. Not a word then he says, "Breakaway, give me a heading home." So I give him a 270 heading or something like that we went home. I never discussed it with him; after all he's a colonel. We took the bombs back. I'll never get over, that's the only time. I guess he felt oh you can't drop bombs, wasted or hurt somebody I don't know. You're the only one I ever told that story.

NC: I guess you never found out why he didn't.

MC: I never asked. What am I gonna ask him for? He'll say "It's none of your business."

NC: Let's go back to when you were first deployed overseas. What unit were you assigned to at that point? Did you have a particular squadron that you were associated with at the point? Do you remember?

MC: Yeah. We flew over.

NC: You didn't fly your own planes over though, did you?

MC: We brought the new ones over, it's what you do. You go to Wichita, Kansas and you get a brand new airplane and that's the way of bringing the new airplanes over. On our whole crew got in there and we stopped up in New Hampshire to refuel and so forth. We flew to Gus Bay, Labrador, then we flew to Iceland overnight there, then we flew over to Wales and we got rid of the plane. And then we went up to the Belfast area and then we were assigned to England, Seething AFB 448<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group. I was in the 713<sup>th</sup> Squadron.

NC: Were you and the men of your crew happy that you were going to Europe as opposed to the Pacific Theater or did you not have any feelings one way or another?

MC: No, I think we were all were happy we were going to someplace where they're English speaking; that's an advantage and better living I guess.

NC: On your first crew was there one particular guy that you became very close to or did you not have any really good, close, personal relationships with anyone?

MC: Old Hyde. His name is L.R. Hyde. I call him "Little Raw Hyde." Lewis, he called me last week and Ben Johnson. Ben Johnson was a nose gunner but he's got Parkinson's now.

NC: What was Hyde's role on the plane?

MC: He was a navigator on the first crew I was with, and then he and I were in the same hut. We were fellow navigators really. So I was checked out as a navigator and I got a certificate and all that kind of stuff. So, we stayed in the same hut even though I wasn't flying with them anymore. I was alone with the Misfits.

NC: Where did you fly your first mission? Do you remember?

MC: Yeah, I got them all listed. They all went to Germany.

NC: When would it have been? Do you know approximately? And I guess it probably would have been some time in '43.

MC: No, '44. One day I sat down, see this book, John Rowe, he was a pilot, this was his crew and he gave me this book. Those are his missions and then I put mine down. The first one was back here September the 12<sup>th</sup> to Germany. They all were Germany after that.

NC: What were your feelings on your first mission? Were you scared, excited, nervous?

MC: No, I'm not that type of guy really. My first mission we went to Eastern Germany, it was a small target. And I noticed on our right this plane was going along, all of the sudden you could see the flak where the artillery 88s hitting. It went bomb, bomb, bomb, bing! And the guy went down, hit his wing, but he pulled out of it way down. So I watched them and lost sight of them that's the way it was.

NC: This was another B-24?

MC: Oh yeah, they were all B-24s.

NC: What did the flak look like?

MC: It's like a puff of smoke. It just billows and then you go through this and you look back and say did I go through that? It rattles against the plane just hope it doesn't get a direct hit. You're always going to get some peripheral damage, splatters. Hopefully, it just doesn't hit an engine.

NC: Did you fly out with fighter escorts at this point or had the Allies achieved air superiority that they didn't need to at this point?

MC: Yes, we had that. That was one of the best things that had ever happened. We go over and fighter escorts coming from France would meet us well before the target and that was a big advantage. We were lucky. Depends on your place in the whole bombing run, I mean the German fighters would come out, if they catch you in the beginning the guys in the back are going to escape it because they're all tied up with somebody and the P-47 Thunderbolts and the P-51. If you were unlucky and you happen to be there when the German fighters happened to decided to come out and fight, well then you were in the middle of it.

NC: Were you ever on board or on a mission when you were attacked by German fighters?

MC: No. Generally, they'd stay their distance if they saw the P-47s and the P-51s. We were lucky. When I saw them in the latter part of the war when they had the jets but they weren't that good at flying jets yet, so they had those ME-262s out there somewhere. They were experimenting with them. Hitler made a big mistake that he didn't get those jets before he did get them. He would have been much better off but he didn't have them. I read an article once that said he thought that he didn't need them particularly, but during it he fell flat on his face because he didn't have the fighter support that he needed. The P-51s just took over.

NC: The waist-gunners and the gunners on your particular planes didn't fire their weapons too often.

MC: Not too often, no, we were lucky.

NC: Tell me a little bit about your responsibilities on a particular mission. You would be the one in charge of charting the course of the plane?

MC: Well, what they did was they gave you a map of the particular part of Europe, Germany and so forth and they outline on it and they sketch exactly the route. Also, on occasion they give you flak points where the German 88s might be. The lead navigator would chart it out and you would follow along. You'd follow along and you always knew where you were based on the lead navigator. If he was on course, you'd be on course; usually they were because you would know it. If he's off course, you would know that, but they did a good job of that.

NC: Were you ever the lead navigator?

MC: No, of the misfits. The only time, one time I was flying an element lead and the lead ship the northern bomb side went out of whack. It was on an operative and they asked me. I got down and I was gonna start bombing for the group but it was overcast. You couldn't see a thing so they dropped it by radar, dropped the bombs by radar.

NC: What was the northern bomb site was that new? Was that a new technology at the time?

MC: Yeah, it's about this big. In fact, a buddy of mine had one. He died a couple of years ago, but he got one. I was wondering what his widow is going to do with it. It's about two feet wide and about a foot and a half high. What you do is

synchronize it and when the two guidelines meet that's when your bombs drop. So what you do is focus on it and try to get the hairs on the target.

NC: And that was located in the nose of the B-24.

MC: The nose, on the floor.

NC: So when you were traveling is that where you spent your time or only when you were ready to bomb you would go there?

MC: Only when I was ready to bomb. When we hit the bomb run, what they call the initial point that's when you get down and you're rotating the knobs trying to get the thing and synchronization.

NC: Did you have a name for the planes that you flew? Did the men name the planes?

MC: Well, ours was Old Pop 75

NC: Was this with the sphincter or was this the original one?

MC: Here it is Old 75.

NC: Oh it had a picture of an old man.

MC: Yeah one old guy but that was my idea or our idea, we inherited this plane.

NC: So that was on there all ready?

MC: Yeah, we came later so we weren't around to initially put all the good stuff on the nose, all the ladies and so forth, pin up girls Betty Grable and the rest of them.

NC: Did you have any idea what the 75 was?

MC: 75 missions that plane had flown up to that point.

NC: Was that the plane that you flew with the misfits?

MC: Yeah, most of the time with John Corbit, he was from Harrisburg, I didn't know him before.

NC: What kinds of equipment were you issued with the expectation or possibility of you being shot down? Did you have an escape kit or did you have sidearms or anything like that?

MC: I was just gonna tell you. We used to carry a .45 gun but then they decided that we turn those in, which I did to the supply section because when a guy went down in Germany with a .45 likely he would be killed. He would probably grab the .45 and the Germans would see he had a .45 and they would shoot him down right on the ground. They stopped that immediately when they had a few incidents like that because the Germans used to take farm implements. Brooms, whatever they'd whack you. I know my old roommate Mickey Schliker, he was shot down in February 1945 and his name Schliker-German he got a few whacks but at least they didn't bother him. If you were Jewish you were in trouble so you tried not to emphasize that.

NC: How many missions did a traditional team or group fly?

MC: 35 for a crew. If you were a lead ship, 30.

NC: Were any of your missions particularly dangerous or difficult that stand out in your mind, where there was a lot of flak or a lot of enemy resistance?

MC: When you went to Hamburg or you went to the Ruhr Valley you got a lot of flak. I went to Magdeburg three times, Hamburg three times and you get a lot of flak when you are above the oil refineries. Hamburg had the oil refineries. Magdeburg had a lot of rail yards, marshaling yards I used to call them, where all the freight came together. Of course the idea was to bomb them and they stop the supplies, oil, and everything else from going through and that's what hurt the Germans near the end of the war because they didn't get the supplies they needed. The Americans controlled the air and that hurt them very very badly.

NC: Were there any type of rivalries in the Army Air Corps related to what type of plane you would fly, for instance the B-25 guys, the B-24 guys, the B-17 guys.

MC: There was an intense rivalry between the B-17 Flying Fortress and the B-24 Liberties and there is to this day.

NC: And you think the B-24 is more important?

- MC: Well naturally I am a B-24 Liberator guy. The B-17s like the Memphis Belle they got all the publicity, but they made more B-24s than they did B-17s that we know. Because they carried a heavier bomb load, they could higher and they could fly farther. They were a better airplane but they used to call them 'flying boxcars' 'flying coffins' but the B-17 looked a little more majestic. They had more fleet, more a shine to them. I don't know, I suppose.
- NC: What kind of uniform did you wear when you were flying? Did you have like a bomber jacket?
- MC: No we had this electric flying suit that's electric, you plug it in and I carried it, then this jacket over it.
- NC: What was the point of the flying suit? I would keep the temperature?
- MC: Well you plug it in. Electric heat, it's heated. Trying to see if you can see it on here. Had the boots on too.
- NC: Who had the highest rank in your plane? You were a first lieutenant at the time.
- MC: First lieutenant was about a captain for a pilot and first lieutenant for the co-pilot, navigator, bombardier, generally. And then you had a staff sergeant for the radio operator and flight engineer and sergeants for the gunners or staff sergeants sometimes.
- NC: What was the feeling like when you first returned from a mission and safely landed in the airfield? Was it a feeling of relief and satisfaction and pride, or did it just become routine for you?
- MC: It became routine, sort of, and of course when you came down you get debriefing. They go and interrogate you and ask you about what you saw. Of course, I as the navigator would record. For example, one day I see a plane maybe at 7 o'clock high. I count 4 parachutes and I say to the guys if I can't see count the parachutes because I have the location and what time. And then what they do is my report plus other planes coming in verify exactly what happened.
- NC: How many missions did you wind up flying in WWII?
- MC: 35.

NC: And then what happens, do you remember the final missions? Does that stand out in your mind because it was such an important one, that 35<sup>th</sup> mission?

MC: No, not really it was kind of hectic. This was right after the Battle of the Bulge and we were flying. I flew Christmas Day, December 25, 1944 and then the next day. The Battle of the Bulge started December 16, 1944 and I didn't fly; went down everyday at about 3 o'clock in the morning something like that, waited. No mission and then we'd go back. Finally December 24<sup>th</sup> I flew, I remember I was just anxious to get them over with because those guys needed some help. I got a letter from Belgium from my friend Ed Shay. Ed had gone to OCS but he didn't make it. He went back and he became a medic and he was in Belgium. He sent me a letter that made feel good that day when I got that letter. He said we came out we saw all those planes, oh they were cheering.

NC: They needed any morale building thing that they could find.

MC: They were stuck for a couple of weeks in there, I guess it was. Now I remember the third choice, I should have remembered it, the 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division! The 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, if you know anything about the Battle of the Bulge, they took the brunt of it. They were a brand new division, they brought them in there. Now I knew quite a few of those officers. They were on the right flank and the 106<sup>th</sup> just brought in to relieve and the Germans with the Battle of the Bulge went through the 106<sup>th</sup>. They had a lot of casualties and a lot of the guys from my OCS class went to the 106<sup>th</sup>. I didn't make that choice I went to Fort Bragg.

NC: It sounds like you would follow daily what was going on the Western Front and what the infantry was doing. Was there a feeling with you colleagues and comrades about what some of the generals were doing? What Eisenhower was doing? What Patton was doing, etc? You focused more on your role and your responsibilities?

MC: No. We didn't talk much about that. Probably didn't know that much about what was going on.

NC: After you flew your 35<sup>th</sup> mission, what was the protocol? You don't have to fly any more missions? Do you leave the Army? What happens?

MC: No. You go back for rotation. What they do automatically they put on my rotation slip suggestion or qualifies as instructor. They put that down automatically. Something happened that was real bad. I had finished up and I

came into my hut one day and I walked in, it was in the afternoon. I was waiting for my orders to go back to the States. I walked in and right across from where I was sleeping, my bed, there was two guys from the supply section in there and they were getting the footlockers and the clothes for the Smerntsky's crew. There were 4 on that crew and they went down. Two planes when down that day, it was a shame. Smerntsky was killed; most of his crew and his co-pilot had just been married several weeks before he came overseas. It was a shame because, what happened was that Lt. Gines, it was all marked in this book because I knew about it. He got hit with a 20 mm cannon shell and they caught him somewhere in the arm. He went down and he took Smerntsky's crew with him underneath. The two planes went down, that's 20 men approximately. They went down; I think there was two that survived down there. It was bad. I came in and I was shocked. It was one guy down on the end on his bunk sitting there and I knew what had happened when I see they're taking. Immediately when a crew goes down you go in and take their stuff. Because these guys you know, some if they know someone isn't coming back, they are unscrupulous, they're going in to take their stuff. I was in shock. Smerntsky was a good friend of mine. He and I used to kid one another. He wanted to go to Sweden. I said "Smerntsky, you're a lot of bull." I never knew his first name until later, his first name was Irving. He was a first lieutenant pilot. We went to Peenemünde where von Braun was assembling his rockets. V-1s and V-2s and we bombed that. I said "Hey there's a chance" because we were close to Sweden now. Two weeks later we go to Kiel, Germany for the summer in pence. I said "You're a lot of bull; you had your chance then." Kiel's a lot closer to Sweden then. He didn't go. It was just too bad though. Never had the chance. He was on his 19<sup>th</sup> mission, I think it was. It's a shame.

NC: So there always was that possibility that you could be hit by a cannon or even an ADAD even though the Allied forces had air superiority.

MC: Oh yeah. It happened to him a week after I finished up. Let me tell you about this picture, this was funny. This happened November 8<sup>th</sup>. There I am with the fatigue uniform and had on KP that day. Here's my cousin Pat, we came in the same time, we were inducted. He gave the mess sergeant three bucks so he could get off and see his girlfriend when she came. These are all our relatives; most of them are gone now. These two are still living.

NC: And that was taken right before you left.

MC: Fort Dix, New Jersey on Saturday. My mother, my dad, my sister, and my aunts, my Uncle Mike.

NC: Well, I want to thank you for sharing your WWII memories with me.

NC: Well I hope's it been helpful.

NC: It's been very interesting and thanks for your service.

[End Tape 1, Side B]

[End of Interview]